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Guilt-Free Pollution. Or Is It?

By JAMES KANTER

Two years ago, Sami Grover, an environmentally minded Englishman, vowed to take his last trip by airplane. Then a summer romance in North Carolina turned into a long-distance love affair -- and then into months of busy trans-Atlantic travel.

To compensate for the tons of greenhouse gases the couple's plane trips helped spew into the atmosphere, Mr. Grover quietly began paying Climate Care, a British company, to help make the world a little greener for him and his girlfriend.

"I didn't want her to think I was some kind of eco-fascist," said Mr. Grover, 28. "I did it for her flights, too, but I did it in secret."

Mr. Grover could no longer be called an environmental zealot. Indeed, he is now in the mainstream of a budding market where individuals can buy and sell rights to offset "carbon footprints" from their personal activities, such as driving a car, using disposable diapers, even jet-setting across the Atlantic.

These days, pop stars, chief executives and politicians vaunt how they offset carbon emissions by planting trees or investing in renewable energy projects -- many in poorer countries in Africa or in India.

Pledges by celebrities, like Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain and members of the band Coldplay, have helped generate huge publicity for these carbon-offset trading companies. In turn, the companies have actively sought out a green glitterati and concerned consumers in Europe and the United States.

The operations reflect a new consciousness about climate change, but scientists and environmental watchdogs say that the carbon trading actually may be producing little of real value to the environment.

"These companies may be operating with the best will in the world, but they are doing so in settings where it's not really clear you can monitor and enforce their projects over time," said Steve Rayner, a senior professor at Oxford and a member of a group working on reducing greenhouse gases for the International Panel on Climate Change. "What these companies are allowing people to do is carry on with their current behavior with a clear conscience."

Some carbon-offset firms have begun to acknowledge that certain investments like tree-planting may be ineffective, and they are shifting their focus to what they say is reliable activity, like wind turbines, cleaner burning stoves, or buying up credits that otherwise would allow companies to pollute.

Still, as demand for greener living grows, the number of companies jumping into the game has multiplied. At least 60 companies sold offsets worth about \$110 million to consumers in Europe and North America in 2006, up from only about a dozen selling offsets worth \$6 million in 2005, according to Abyd Karmali of ICF International.

John Hay, a spokesman for the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Bonn, Germany, said that carbon offsets are "good first steps" because they raise awareness about climate change with the public.

When it comes to the offsets these companies offer, many environmental groups seem to be even more skeptical than Professor Rayner.

Climate Care, the company that Mr. Grover used to offset his and his girlfriend's carbon footprint, also undertook a project to finance the distribution of tens of thousands of low-energy fluorescent lights in South African townships.

Shortly after the program got under way, however, a state energy utility distributed millions of similar bulbs free. That meant that the "so-called reductions that Climate Care is selling to its customers arguably would have happened anyway," said Larry Lohmann of the Corner House, a campaign group for environmental and social justice based in Britain, citing evidence from investigators in South Africa.

Michael Buick, a spokesman for Climate Care, argues that the project was effective because the bulbs added to the millions supplied by the government, and he said township residents would save enough money on electricity to replace them when they wear out.

The divergence in views over what really works to limit climate change and what is effective has overshadowed a number of these initiatives, particularly in poorer countries where companies have sought to establish many of these offsets.

Another green-looking investment has drawn substantial controversy -- the planting of trees, to which consumers often flock as a symbol of saving the environment. Scientists and environmentalists tend to agree, however, that mass plantings are among the least effective initiatives for offsetting carbon footprints.

Any number of problems can arise with tree-planting programs. One of the most troubled tree projects, say these critics, is linked to GreenSeat, a Dutch carbon-offset business. GreenSeat buys offsets from a Dutch foundation involved in the reforestation of Mount Elgon National Park in east Uganda, with a tree-planting program that it guarantees for 99 years, relying on close cooperation with the local population.

The reality, said Jutta Kill, a climate campaigner at Fern, an organization monitoring the carbon market, is that villagers living along the boundary of the park have been beaten and shot at, and their livestock has been confiscated by armed park rangers because of disputes over ownership of the land.

Ms. Kill, who visited the site to verify the information, said the trees are also in danger and that carbon is released when locals chop them down, or if they die before they even have a chance to absorb the emissions paid for by customers.

Niels Korthals Altes, a spokesman for GreenSeat, said the company took seriously the allegations of violence against locals. But he dismissed criticism of the project's effectiveness, saying small losses of trees were taken into account when selling offsets.

Yet another perverse effect, say critics, is that some types of carbon-offset initiatives may actually slow the changes aimed at coping with global warming by prolonging consumers' dependence on oil, coal and gas, and encouraging them to take more short-haul flights and drive bigger cars than they would otherwise have done.

Climate Care, for example, has linked up with Land Rover, a maker of sport utility vehicles, to help the company offset its own emissions. As part of a promotional program, Climate Care also helps purchasers of new Land Rovers offset their first 45,000 miles of driving.

In that way, the program may actually help sell "larger cars with higher emissions" and thus contribute more to global warming, according to Mary Taylor, a campaigner with the energy and climate team at Friends of the Earth.

Some consumers are thinking twice about whether to use offsets. In Davos, Switzerland, last month, Larry Page, a founder of Google, mentioned that his founding colleague, Sergey Brin, had been using offsets to help reduce the carbon footprint he produced from flying their private Boeing 767.

When asked, Mr. Brin said he was skeptical of whether offsets were effective. "I'm not sure," he said. "I think it does something."

But he added, "I think I would pursue something more specialized and personal" rather than relying on offsets, which, at the time, "was the most expedient thing I could do."

The Energy Challenge

Articles in this series are examining the ways in which the world is, and is not, moving toward a more energy-efficient, environmentally benign future. Previous articles are at nytimes.com/energychallenge.

Correction:

February 24, 2007, Saturday Because of an editing error, an article in Business Day on Tuesday about the growing market for carbon-offset trading companies misstated the year in which the total sales of offsets was \$6 million. It was 2004, not 2005.